Dallas Buyers Club: Critique

Introduction

Dallas Buyers Club as a real-life story about the life of Ron Woodroof, a rodeo worker from Texas who was diagnosed with Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), a disease of the human immune system, but outlived his prognosis by seven years due to the work he did after the diagnosis to prolong his life. Taking place in Dallas during the 1980s, the pharmacological treatments available to treat AIDS at the time were very limited. The only drug officially approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States was called zidovudine (often called "AZT" in the movie), an antiretroviral medication that prevents DNA containing virus from forming. Even though this drug was available, it was only approved for limited-enrollment human trial testing; at the time of the movie, the drug was still very new and not everyone understood the effects the drug may have on a patient's health and wellbeing.

Ron Woodroof initial trial of zidovudine was not successful; in fact, the medication seemed to have made his condition worse. Ron Woodroof then attempts to obtain other experimental medications such as zalcitabine (called "ddC" in the movie) and protein peptide T to treat himself. Because these other pharmacological treatments were not available in the United States at the time, Ron Woodroof had to obtain his medications in other countries such as Mexico and Japan. He also sets up a business in Dallas that he called the "Dallas Buyers Club" to distribute the experimental treatments to patients with AIDS who had to pay him a $400 membership fee to continue receiving treatment each month. Eventually, Ron Woodroof became more and more invested in the cause of the gay, lesbian, and transgender population of the Dallas Buyers Club and became less concerned in making money through the club. He would spend the

rest of his life battling the Food and Drug Administration for the right to take the experimental medications.

The Business World

Viewers of *Dallas Buyers Club* first got a glimpse into the business world at the meeting between Barrow Wilkem, a drug company, and the Dallas Mercy Hospital. Rick Ferris, a representative from the drug company, introduced AZT to a group of physicians and hospital board members. Amongst this group was Dr Eve Saks (played by Jennifer Garner). Rick Ferris proposed fast-tracking a double-blind, placebo-controlled randomized trial at Dallas Mercy Hospital; it is part of a larger national trial of the drug in the United States. Dr Eve Saks voiced concern about the drug's potential negative side effects when it was tested in animals. Rick Ferris quickly dismissed the concern as a "dosage-based problem" and explained to the room that the physicians and the hospital will be well-compensated for their efforts in the trial.

In this first portrayal of "the business world", we received a negative glimpse into the pharmaceutical industry. Rick Ferris, the drug representative, was portrayed as a well-dressed, gold watch-wearing businessman who was not so much concerned about the health and well-being of patients as he was about quickly getting AZT tested in human trials. Rick Ferris tells the group of physicians and hospital board members that the number one priority of Barrow Wilkem is to get "this drug to the market". The viewers got a feeling that his number one priority was not being "on the forefront in finding a cure" but rather generating money for his company. Viewers might have also noticed how the hospital board members traded looks at each other when monetary compensation was mentioned. At the end of the meeting, Dr Sevard, a doctor who was in the room as well, told Dr Eve Saks that "like it or not, this is a business".

Business Ethical Dilemmas

In the Barrow Wilkem meeting mentioned above, viewers also witnessed the first business ethical dilemma of the movie. As previously mentioned, Rick Ferris, a drug representative, proposed fast-tracking a double-blind, placebo-controlled randomized trial at Dallas Mercy Hospital; it is part of a larger national trial of the drug in the United States. Rick Ferris tells the group of physicians and hospital board members that the number one priority of Barrow Wilkem is to get "this drug to the market". The viewers got a feeling that his number one priority was not being "on the forefront in finding a cure" but rather generating money for his company. Most of the physicians did not raise any concerns at the possible negative side effects associated with the medication. Viewers assumed that the group of physicians and board members approved the trial off-screen, and largely due to the monetary compensation that was offered to the hospital. In my opinion, I was with Dr Eve Saks in thinking that the company representative should have been asked to present more supportive evidence of the medication. I would not have been comfortable approving any human trials at my hospital if the effects that the medication may have on my patients were questionable. I would've asked the drug representative to come back with more convincing evidence. Also, I did not think that monetary compensation was appropriate in this situation. Receiving monetary compensation was a conflict of interest. If our hospital were to be compensated for our work, there might have been incentives to report data that would be favorable to the drug company in hope of a favorable compensation package. Hospital staff and drug administrators might not have reported any negative side effects in fear of "angering" the drug company. It felt wrong to me that conducting the trials allowed us to be compensated.

I noticed a second business ethical dilemma when Dr Vass, the “Doctor” from Mexico, sold Ron Woodroof a large shipment of ddC and peptide T. Those treatments were not approved by the Food and Drug Administration in the United States and so, essentially, Dr Vass was helping Ron smuggle unapproved medication into the country. Although the treatments did provide Ron with better benefits than before, they were not yet approved in the United States and as a future health care practitioner, I wondered if that was ethical. Doctors have vowed to “do no harm” towards their patients and what Dr Vass was doing was potentially harmful to many patients including Ron. We did not know if Dr Vass knew whether the drug was going to be distributed at that time. If I was in Dr Vass’ position, I would not have sold the medication to a man I had just met not very long ago.

A third business ethical dilemma was presented on Ron Woodroof’s “business trip” to Japan to purchase another drug for his treatment that was not yet available in the United States. Ron had just learned from his business contact at Hayashira Lab, a Japanese pharmaceutical company, that he was not allowed to purchase any medications because the company was “no longer allowed to export interferon to the United States”. In a transaction that was similar to what happened in Mexico, Ron visited a Japanese doctor and bribed him with cash to get him to legally order the medication from the Japanese company. The doctor asked that the medication be delivered directly to him, a request made most likely to avoid detection by the authorities. The Japanese doctor made the decision to purchase the drug even though he knew that the medication was going to be smuggled into the United States. If I was placed in that position I would have never complied with Ron’s request. Since the medication was an injectable medication, most patients would not have the proper training to correctly administer this medication. Viewers saw

this immediate in the next scene when Ron nearly got a heart attack after injecting the medication into himself way too quickly despite the Japanese doctor's warning.

Other Business Ethics Issues

The concept of a Dallas Buyers Club felt very unethical to me. Although the movie portrayed Ron Woodroof as a hero in the gay, lesbian, and transgender community, his actions could have just as likely killed thousands of people. From the make-shift office in the hotel room to the illegal dealings that Ron had to pull off to start the Club, the entire process seemed very wrong, and it gave me a very bad feeling. What if, for every Ron Woodroof, there was a disgruntled patient going around distributing medications yet causing more harm than good? As the movie had suggested, the Dallas Buyers Club was no longer the only Buyers Club that existed. A Florida Buyers Club was quoted as having cheaper medications. Although Ron Woodroof's actions helped out those in his community, what was the risk he indirectly placed other communities in when all the other copycat Buyers Clubs sprung up? I think these are serious questions that requires examination.

Summary

Dallas Buyers Club was a wonderful movie. However, what I learned while completing this exercise was that a lot of poor business ethical decisions were made in the course of Ron Woodroof's lifetime. Although I don't think anyone would argue that Ron was a hero, I must admit I realized that issues which involves business ethics are often not black and white. A character such as Ron Woodroof can do completely unethical things but still be praised and applauded for his work.